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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is: (1) to examine the contribution of the conceptual social ecological literature to our understanding of traditional conceptions of mental disorder and social adjustment; and (2) to assess its implications for future research. In the context of this study, the term "human ecology" is used and refers to the study of man as a function of his positional occupancy in various social structures. It is one possible model for the study of man and is primarily concerned with discovering that balance of social environmental elements that would optimize man's adjustment and survival. In relationship to this model, the literature in the following 2 areas is reviewed: (1) Social Causation and Enlarged Conceptions of Maladjustment; and (2) Social Structures and Adjustment. From this review it is concluded that future research and model building pertinent to overcrowding and other such environmental matters would do well to avoid normative and one sided approaches to the program, i.e., emphasizing either environmental or personalism to its extremes. (RK)

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A CRITIQUE OF THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY--ADJUSTMENT LITERATURE

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The purpose of this paper is to examine, in brief, the contribution of the conceptual social ecological literature to our understanding of traditional conceptions of mental disorder and social adjustment. And to assess its implications for future research.

Historically, the term "ecology" was first used around 1870 in the biological sense. Since then it has come to have different meanings in different disciplines--such as medicine and geography.

In the social sciences, however, "ecology" has referred chiefly to social and cultural as well as physical environments. In the 1920's and 30's Robert Park (1931)--sometimes called the founder of social ecology--noted that the ecological models used in animal studies were not entirely appropriate for human beings because each human society had a cultural or moral order which restricted or limited the workings of the ecological order. Even with this reservation Park felt that much could be learned from influences upon man of the events and happenings that impinged upon him.

Consequently, human ecology became the study of man as a function of his positional occupancy in various social structures. It is one possible model for the study of man and is primarily concerned with discovering that balance of social environmental elements that would optimize man's adjustment and survival (cf. Dunham, 1968).

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Social Causation and Enlarged Conceptions of Maladjustment

The preponderance of ecological field research coming out of social sciences has been produced in two areas: the study of the epidemiology of mental illness and organization theory. Both of these disciplines have been concerned, at least in part, with the study of the distribution of mental illness and maladjustment in specified social systems.

And one of the most notable concommitants of the growth of research activities in these areas has been the tendency for definitions of mental illness and maladjustment to enlarge. In the ten surveys reviewed by Plunkett and Gordon in 1960, the ones conducted after 1950 reported four to five times the amount of mental disorder in selected communities than did those done before 1940. For example, Leighton's (1960) study in Sterling County found that half the adults in their population had some disorder listed in the APA diagnostic manual. And the Mid-Town Manhattan study of Srole, et al. (1962) reported that 80 percent of its sample suffered from some sort of psychiatric impairment.

Now it might be concluded that such research supports the widely popular view that mental illness is on the upswing. However, since there is good reason to doubt the substance of this belief, at least so far as traditional categories of mental illness are concerned (cf. Hunt, 1958), it seems more reasonable to conclude that what is reflected is growth of more inclusive conceptions of illness (Hunt, Lichtman, and McClintock, 1970).

Further, many of these studies of the distribution of social adjustment have conceptualized their findings in terms of the traditional ecological approach. That is, the social causation hypothesis (Dohrenwend, 1966)

stressing etiology in terms of pressures, deprivations, and benefits characteristic of different positions in the structure of society, an organization (or some analogous predictors). The thrust of such as conceptual scheme is to view man as being at the mercy of the inevitable and mechanical operation of ecological processes at the symbiotic level. However, as we shall see, viewing man in this light may be of only limited usefulness in explaining the evidence.

Social Structures and Adjustment

Reviewing the conceptual and empirical literature concerned with the distribution and incidence of mental disorder in social systems reveals it to be segmental, conflicting, and highly inconclusive with regard to establishing any causal relationship between properties of social structures and emotional adjustment. The following examples from parallel work in both epidemiology and organizational health will attempt to highlight this position.

Epidemiology. One of the oldest epidemiological hypotheses was the social isolation hypothesis posited by Faris and Dunham in their book Mental Disorders in Urban Areas (1939), in an attempt to explain the high prevalence of schizophrenia in central areas of Chicago. Briefly, the social isolation hypothesis states that symbolic communication and controlled social interaction between persons are necessary for the development of normal behavior and thought processes. Breaks in communication have a deleterious effect upon emotional adjustment. These breaks in communication and interaction are most likely to occur in those parts of

a social structure characterized by excessive mobility, overcrowding, ethnic conflict, and general lack of consensus. The result for people in these areas is social isolation, and the development of seclusive traits which are the forerunners of schizophrenia. Therefore, social isolation produces schizophrenia--a fine example of the social causation approach.

Later research, however, has been unable to bear out Faris and Dunham hypothesis. Studies by Jaco (1954) and Clausen and Kohn (1955) on schizophrenics were unable to show that schizophrenics were necessarily any more isolated than non-schizophrenics, or that social isolation is even a predisposing factor in schizophrenia. If this hypothesis is to have any causative significance it would be necessary to show that schizophrenics have been and felt isolated while growing up. The bridge between social isolation and schizophrenia has not successfully been gapped.

Nevertheless, the data themselves still ask the question of why there is more mental disorders in some segments of society than others. So another major hypothesis, seemingly supported by much data, was fostered by Hollingshead and Redlich (1958) in their book Social Class and Mental Illness, and says that there is an inverse relation between social class and mental illness.

These authors found that indeed the prevalence and diagnosis of mental disease are related to the class structure. The lower the social class, the higher the prevalence of disorder. Furthermore, Hollingshead and Redlich convey the notion that the quality of lower class life causes mental disorder. The difficulty here is that their data concerning the incidence, i.e., new cases, of mental disorder, were not so clear as their prevalence, data, i.e., existing cases.

This state of affairs encouraged other investigators to design studies which would look more closely at the true, unduplicated incidence of mental disorder as a function of social class and geographic area. Such investigators as Goldberg and Morrison (1963) and Dunham (1965) have argued that prevalence and incidence data are confounded with each other when social class is not defined independently of the person developing the psychosis. These authors feel that Hollingshead and Redlich's data are therefore confounded by using the patient's own social class. In other words, is there more psychosis among lower classes because it developed there, or because psychotics end up there? Thus, independently, Goldberg and Morrison, in London, and Dunham in Detroit have published data showing that if a schizophrenic patient is regarded as the same social class as his father, then the incidence of schizophrenia is at parity for all social classes.

Such finds as these cast serious doubt on conceptions of a causal relationship between social class and mental disorder. In fact, some investigators, are currently favoring social selection as an alternative to social causation explanations of the distributions of mental disorder. The social selection view is that people have an equal chance of becoming psychotic in whatever environment they find themselves, but seek their own level of adjustment in those locations in both geographical and social space best able to accommodate them. In other words, the social selection hypothesis emphasizes the notion that selective processes at work in the social system tend to distribute cases of mental illness in certain patterns in social structures (Dohrenwend, 1966). Thus the social selection approach, as opposed to the social causation hypothesis, views man as an active

cultural agent attempting to shape and remold the type of sociocultural environment that has evolved for and by him through time (cf. Dunham, 1968).

Thus, after 30 years of research in the area of social environments and human adjustment the results are at best conflicting and confusing. The data so far simply do not bear out the notion that poverty, bad neighborhoods, overcrowding, etc. necessarily cause mental disorder and imperfect adjustment defined traditionally. It may well be that reconceptualizations of maladjustment would yield different results.

Organizations. Analogous to the work of the epidemiologists is the work of researchers concerned with matters of organizational health. Organizational psychology has produced several ambitious studies of the distribution of emotional problems in work organizations. Notable among these are Kahn, et. al,'s detailed analysis of role relations and organizational stress (1964), Levinson, et al.'s intensive study of work experience within a single organization (1962), some of Argyris' work on the individual and the organization (e.g., 1957, 1964), Blauner's studies of alienation among factory workers (1964), the work of Walker and Guest (e.g., 1952), and Guring, Veroff and Feld's national survey (1960).

Similar to the epidemiological studies, the research in organizations has for the most part, been inconclusive concerning the distribution of adjustment, tension, anxiety, etc. by organizational level. While some studies (e.g., Kornhauser, 1965) report a higher prevalence of adjustment problems in lower occupational levels, others (e.g., Kahn, et al., 1964) find a greater prevalence at higher levels.

It is interesting, then, that not even prevalence studies in organizations are in agreement, incidence data is virtually nonexistant.

What sense, then, are we to make of the research linking various aspects of organizational and community environments to human adjustment? A recent paper by Hunt, Lichtman, and McClintock (1970) has argued that very little sense can be made. Virtually all of the research to date, whether large scale or small, has been highly selective either with regard to samplings of organizations and communities, organization and community members, dimensions of performance, or criteria of health, to say nothing of the theoretical perspectives under which it has been performed. Some provocative attempts at taking the "borad view" have been essayed--e.g., Bell (1956); Neff, (1968); Argyris, (1964); and Herzberg, (1961)--but these have almost always been quasi-philosophical, highly programmatic, only loosely related to data, or excessively colored by advocacy of some preformed conceptual position.

Moreover, even the apparent empirical foundations for such integrations are less secure than one might wish. For instance, quite apart from the restrictive features of its special point of view it is not at all clear that Kahn et al.'s conclusions are closely linked with their data (cf. Lichtman, 1968). Nor do Kornhauser's findings that a man's "position in the occupational hierarchy" is the most prominent factor affecting mental health stand without challenge (cf. Lefkowitz, 1966). And while Smith and Cranny (1968) can conclude that interpersonal relations and supervisory skills assume low importance for most workers, that certainly was not the case in Levinson et al.'s work (nor does it accord with the

views of Litwin and Stringer, 1968). But Levinson et al. did not study factory workers (just as Kornhauser's was mainly a blue collar sample) and Smith and Cranny seem to be referring mainly to questionnaire findings, which was not Levinson's method.

Inconsistencies in the research literature and uncertainties of conception sum to considerable disarray in the fields of mental and organizational health and Porter's (1966) plea for more integrative theory with greater attention to "moderator" variables seems to make a great deal of sense. And one might add the potential of relativity of method to be a basis for disparate findings. You can find whatever you want by choosing the right measures.

The literature pertinent to these epidemiological hypotheses has clearly shown that the time worn structure-personality debate (cf. Lichtman and Hunt, in press) is still raging. It also raises questions concerning the interaction of any social system with its environment. Certainly, a man's experience in a community and its work organizations probably play some part in shaping the attitudes, dispositions and whatnot tapped in community mental health surveys. But at the same time, social systems may derive many of their distinctive features from the more enduring characteristics of the persons who populate them.

The moral to be drawn is that to understand social adjustment and mental health it is not sufficient to view environments as isolated structures either solely the result of, or entirely responsible for, the physical, mental, and attitudinal states of the people within. The role that people have played in forming the environment must not be overlooked in our conceptual models and data collection schemes.

In sum, the experience of the past indicates that future research and model building pertinent to overcrowding and other such environmental matters would do well to avoid normative and one sided approaches to the problem, i.e., emphasizing either environmentalism or personalism to its extremes. Rather what is becoming increasingly clear is that people and their surroundings are mutually influencing and supporting phenomena and that the aim of social science should be to better understand the systemic nature of this interaction.

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